

Prayer Letter

April 2009

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter (Isaiah 5:20, NIV).

What word pops into your head when you think of Sicily? For 99% of you it will be “Mafia”. Well, we met the mafia the other day. The day we were dreading finally arrived. Being a massive fan of the Godfather films I (Huw) knew this moment had to come. “This is nothing personal; it’s just business” was the motto of the film. The mafia message is always this: “We have to extort money from you because we would not be able to hold our heads up high if we did not. It is a rule of nature: the strong must dominate the weak. Nothing personal”.

So what happened? Nothing dramatic. Alex and I were out visiting a church member in hospital. Parking in Syracuse would tax the patience even of Job. As we passed down yet another street of parked cars we saw what looked like a space in front of us. We did not get too excited. Normally this means that there is a some very good reason why you cannot park there. Perhaps that space gives access to a garage or to the street dustbins. But no; this was a place. In fact it was two places. Even I could get in there driving my huge Fiat Doblo. “Thank you Lord! Miracles do still happen”. And how kind! A man was guiding us in, although in this case I had absolutely no need for help.

However as I locked the car I noticed that this man was not going away. He said something in very strong dialect and I could not even begin to understand him. The fact that we did not live in a notorious city like Palermo or Naples made me slow to realise what was going on. We had never faced this issue before. Finally the penny (or “centesimo”) dropped: he was “hustling” me. The transaction is very simple. You give this man a “tip” for his kindness and he “looks after your car for you”. Nothing wrong with that, you think. You can even pay your tip and fool yourself that you are simply paying to receive a service. But the reality is different. You know that if you do not pay your “tip” some “accident” might happen to your car. And ironically it will be the very man who is offering to “protect” your car that will engineer this accident.

What to do? I fell back to an old trick. Low, but it works. I played the stupid British tourist. “I don’t understand! “What



do you want?” I said in painfully slow English, pronouncing every syllable. His guttural dialect did not enlighten me. I repeated the question. In frustration he took some change out of his pocket and held it up to my face. I changed tack: “My car is OK”, I repeated like a stuck record; “My car is OK”. He vainly tried to continue shaking his handful of change while I continued my act. We walked away from the car leaving him looking somewhat confused.

I felt quite clever at first. Then less so. Perhaps I should have given him the 50 centesimi (these days about 50p). My hospital visit was somewhat ruined by the thought in the back of my mind that my car was at risk. Instead of my friend Piero (one of the people we baptized last May) receiving my undivided attention, various nightmare scenarios were running through my mind. What if I came back to a smoking wreck where my car used to be? I have already had one car stolen in my time here (the second ugliest car in the world, the hideous Fiat Multipla). Would this be another? In my misspent youth (OK, my adult life too) I have watched far too many gangster films. Would they cut that cable under the car that they always seem to cut? So when I try to brake as I hurtle down a hill nothing happens and we go shooting off a cliff?

We rather cut short our visit with Piero and we hurried back to the car. It seemed alright and the man had gone. There was nothing obviously wrong with it on closer inspection. We got in. The windscreen wipers were still there, the windscreen hasn’t been scratched. I hesitated again before switching on the ignition. Again, the result of watching far too many gangster

films. Would the car blow up? At this point I realised that I was descending into paranoia, and we drove away laughing.

But with all the worry this caused me perhaps I should have just paid up. I could have consoled myself that he was doing me a service. Maybe he would have protected my car from street urchins, I could have reasoned. But I would have been deceiving myself. I would have paid up because I was afraid of what this man might or might not have done to my car. That uncertainty combined with the relatively small sum of money involved makes it “rational” to pay, and this is what the gangsters depend on. 50p is not bad for a bit of peace of mind.

This type of calculation is what is holding Sicily back. Almost every shopkeeper has to pay protection money, although all will deny it. It stifles entrepreneurship and initiative, breeding fatalism and cynicism. Our church has hosted two anti-mafia evenings since we have been there (I am still awaiting the mafia equivalent of the “black spot” for that). It is a huge issue, but nobody dares deal with it for obvious reasons. The “default mode” is just to pay up; anything else requires great bravery. In fact, in all walks of life in Italy, from political to religious to commercial you find “intermediaries” who demand a heavy burden from you. Like this street hustler, they first pretend they are doing you a favour. Then comes the offer to be your indispensable agent. “Use my services and I will ensure all goes well for you”. Behind the kind offer is an implied threat: “Do not use my services and I will make you regret it”. That was as far as it goes with the street hustler. But with the various “mafias” in Sicily, be they political, religious or criminal, comes a third stage. Having submitted to them they now dominate you more and more. A shop keeper who pays his protection money might also find that they are forced to hire an entirely unsuitable assistant who happens to be related to someone in the mob. By giving them a bit of control, they now take over completely.

Other official and unofficial religious groups work on the same principle. We have already had contact with both Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. One lady who now comes to the church with her husband was with the JW’s for 20 years and is still traumatized by the excommunication she recently had pronounced against her. The “hustle” is the same. Perhaps she was initially attracted by their kindness: “Are you concerned about the way the world is going?”. Then she started attending meetings and she soon would have learnt that there was no way to please God except through their indispensable intermediation. So she bought all the Watchtower publications she could find. Then of course their control over her life increased. To really please God you must dedicate several hours each day to “witnessing” on the streets. Finally when her husband showed her from the internet that the JW’s were a sect

she broke with them, but they punished her by insisting that all her former friends ignore her. We are trying to fill the gap by giving her a role in our homework club but the sense of loss is often overpowering for her.

This might seem a strange reflection to make on a street hustler asking me for 50 centesimi. He might not even have been a member of the lowest level of the mob. He might just have been an independent, hoping that I would think that he might be part of something bigger. We might not have even met the mafia. Still, we did not give in to fear. Please pray that all those who call themselves disciples of Christ will have such an attitude.

It is hard to know how to get out of this web. Indeed, what is the solution for the millions of Italians who live in fear of those who have come to dominate their lives? Faith is the only antidote to fear. We must be so enamoured with Jesus that all our problems become secondary. We must be so full of His Spirit that there is no room for fear and doubt to take hold.. Please pray for great courage in Sicilian society, in and out of the church. Fear is so dominant that there is no culture of the “whistleblower”. In this way corruption and extortion continue unchecked. Pray also that the church can lead the way in being salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). As we enter the Easter period, may we reflect on both the greatness of man’s wickedness and the even greater love of God shown to us in Christ crucified. We who serve Christ wholeheartedly can be assured that we have a resurrection and a future even when society seems to be going from bad to worse. Let us not keep this wonderful hope to ourselves: let’s make a point of spreading it this Easter (see Ephesians 1:18-23).

*Happy Easter,
Huw & Alex Anderson*

PS. On a personal note please pray for our church to find much required unity and purpose by reaching out to the neediest in society with the gospel and with practical help. At present we feel the Lord is leading us to take a special interest in the (mostly illegal) immigrants from Africa who arrive with nothing and desperately need help on all kinds of levels.

PPS. By the way, two days after the events described above we noticed that one of my tyres was very low. On inspection, it had a slow puncture. When it next rained we also noticed that the rubber on one of my windscreen wipers had split. Forget what we said above: we will most likely pay up next time!